The Triumph of Life was the last major work by Percy Bysshe Shelley before his death in 1822.[1] The work was left unfinished. Shelley wrote the poem at Casa Magni in Lerici, Italy in the early summer of 1822.[1] He modeled the poem, written in terza rima, on Petrarch's Trionfi and Dante's Divine Comedy.[1]
Shelley was working on the poem when he was accidentally drowned on July 8, 1822 during a storm on a voyage from Leghorn.[2]
The poem was first published in the collection Posthumous Poems (1824) published in London by John and Henry L. Hunt which was edited by his wife Mary Shelley, who emphasized the importance of the work.
The theme of the poem is an exploration of the nature of being and reality.[1] For Shelley, life itself, the “painted veil” which obscures and disguises the immortal spirit, is a more universal conqueror than love, death, fame, chastity, divinity, or time, and, in a dream vision, he sees this triumphal chariot pass, “on the storm of its own rushing splendour,” over the captive multitude of men.[3] Ultimately, natural life corrupts and triumphs over the spirit.[4]
Synopsis
"The Triumph of Life" consists of 548 lines in terza rima.

- Lines 1-40. Introduction: The narrator introduces himself, explains that his untold personal crisis must "remain untold", and describes the dream Vision.
- Lines 41-175. The visionary triumphal pageant is described.
- 41 The narrator describes a "stream of people" in the street.
- 54 Each person is described as deficient, limited, and obsessed.
- 67 They do not attend to nature.
- 77 He sees an icy glaring light approach, and a chariot bearing the hooded figure of Life.
- 94 The chariot is led by a blindfolded Janus figure, a Shadow.
- 110 The pageant is attended by a crowd of a million, like a Roman triumph.
- 128 There are also the sacred few who flee from the chariot.
- 137 There is wild dancing.
- 159 Some of them fall and the chariot passes over them.
- 164 The old men and women left behind, sink to corruption.
- Lines 176-295. Jean-Jacques Rousseau identifies figures and warns against inaction.
- 176 Saddened, he notices an old root is alive; Rousseau in state of nature.
- 188 Rousseau is to tell the story of the procession.
- 200 He relates his own failure to avoid corruption.
- 208 He talks on those chained to the car: the wise and great who fail to know truth.
- 215 Napoleon Bonaparte is described.
- 235 Other rulers are described: anarchs, demagogues, sage.
- 254 The Greek philosopher Plato is described.
- 269 Francis Bacon is described.
- 274 Classical bards, the first Christian emperors are described.

- 292 They are leaders who ruled only to destroy.
- Lines 296-543. Rousseau's own story is related in allegories.
- 300 Rousseau begins to speak of his own plight.
- 305 The narrator should turn from spectator to actor.
- 308 Rousseau tells his story.
- 316 He describes the grove of forgetfulness.
- 331 This is the grove into which he was born.
- 352 He describes the shape: the bright but perhaps deadly light of knowing.
- 385 The dance of the shape effaces human thought, the memory of childhood.
- 398 Rousseau asks where he has come from.
- 404 He drinks from the cup of knowledge.
- 411 He is given a new vision, the shape fades, and his past with it.
- 434 He sees the chariot advancing with its captive crowd.
- 460 Rousseau is swept on with it.
- 480 The figures in the procession shed their shadows, with "Phantoms diffused around".
- 500 Death resumes the power of monarchs.
- 518 He sees the aging of youth and beauty.
- 526 From each fall numerous shadows or masks.
- Lines 544-548. "What is Life?" he asks.

Footnotes

1. ^ a b c d Sandy, Mark. "The Triumph of Life". The Literary Encyclopedia. First published 20 September 2002 http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=7981, accessed 25 October 2010.
2. ^ Bradley, A. C. "Notes on Shelley's 'Triumph of Life'." The Modern Language Review, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Oct., 1914), pp. 441-456.
3. ^ The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes (1907–21). Volume XII. The Romantic Revival.III. Shelley.§ 9. The Triumph of Life. NY: Putnam, 1907–21.
4. ^ Hodgson, John A. "The World's Mysterious Doom: Shelley's The Triumph of Life." ELH, 42 (1975): 595-622.

§ 9. The Triumph of Life.

In April, the Pisan circle broke up, and Shelley, eager for the sea, settled, with Mary, and Edward and Jane Williams, in a lonely mansion, Casa Magni, on the wild Spezian bay. Several of the lyrics to Jane were written here, but his central pre-occupation was the uncompleted Triumph of Life. Petrarch, in his Trionfi, had portrayed men subjugated by love, chastity, time. For Shelley, life itself, the “painted veil” which obscures and disguises the immortal spirit, is a more universal conqueror, and, in vision, he sees this triumphal chariot pass, “on the storm of its own rushing

splendour," over the captive multitude of men. Dante, rather than Petrarch, has inspired the conduct of the vision, where Rousseau, the darkened light whence a thousand beams had been kindled, interprets, like Vergil, to the rapt and questioning poet. Much of the symbolism is obscure, but the significant allusion to the Paradiso—

> the rhyme
> Of him whom from the lowest depths
> of hell
> Through every Paradise and through all
> glory
> Love led serene, and who returned to
> tell
> In words of hate and awe—the
> wondrous story
> How all things are transfigured except
> Love—

justifies the surmise that love, which arms heroic spirits against the sway of life, was, in some way, to win the final triumph. The terza rima is very nobly handled, with a dominant fluidity which is more Petrarchian than Dantesque, but with moments of concentrated brevity which belong to the greater model. And the passionate outlook upon life which pervades and informs it marks Shelley's kinship. The sequel, doubtless, would have added clearness to a poem which remains one of the grandest, but by no means the least enigmatic, among the torsos of modern poetry.

The Triumph of Life was the occupation of summer days spent afloat with 3
Williams, on the Spezian bay. On 8 July, Shelley's boat was run down, it is 6
said deliberately, in a sudden squall. His ashes, by the care of Trelawny, were buried in the protestant cemetery at Rome, side by side with those of the great brother-poet whose requiem he had sung, and whose poetry had been his companion in the hour of death.

Shelley, "The Triumph of Life"
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544-548. What is Life? -- fragment